

FRANCISCO VASQUEZ DE CORONADO

Spain's appetite for gold was not satisfied with the conquests of Mexico and Peru. Far to the north, in what is now the southwestern part of the United States, the Seven Cities of Cibola were said to exist. These were rumored to be rich Indian cities with houses and buildings lined with turquoise and interiors filled with gold and other riches. The task of bringing this supposed new wealth under Spanish control fell to one Francisco Vasquez de Coronado.

Francisco Coronado was born in Salamanca, Spain. He came to the New World in 1535 to seek his fortune. Shortly after his arrival in Mexico he was appointed governor of New Galicia, a part of Mexico north of Mexico City. His power and prestige grew.

In 1540, Coronado was selected by the Viceroy of Mexico to lead an expedition to locate the Seven Cities of Cibola. In February of that year he rode north with 336 soldiers and several hundred Indians, as well as an ample number of horses and field guns. Based on reports that later proved to be completely false, Coronado was confident of finding Cibola.

From the start the expedition seemed destined for failure. Instead of green valleys and low hills, the conquistadors found high mountains and a wasteland with little food to eat. Still they pushed on, crossing southeast Arizona into New Mexico. At times, resistance from the Indians of the region was as much a problem as the scarcity of food.

After 77 days, Coronado came in sight of Cibola. Excitement ran high. From a distance, the Spaniards thought they were gazing at cities of gold, shining brilliantly in the sunlight. They soon discovered, however, that the golden glow they had seen was the sun illuminating the clay pueblos (houses) of the Zuni Indians who lived there. They knew then that the Seven Cities of Cibola did not exist.

Having dismissed Cibola as pure myth, Coronado moved on into Oklahoma and Kansas. He had been told by a captive Indian called "The Turk" that there was indeed a rich Indian kingdom, but that it was farther to the northeast. It was called Quivira, and gold was said to be so abundant that the king's canoes had golden oarlocks.

Coronado's search for Quivira ended in the same disappointing way as his earlier quest for Cibola. All he found on the Kansas plains was a hot sun and a group of thatched huts. Disheartened at finding no gold, he returned to Mexico a broken man. He was relieved of his position as governor of New Galicia, but remained in Mexico until his death in 1554.

Francisco Coronado never realized the importance of his undertaking. His expedition opened up the southwest to Spanish colonization. It also gathered much information about this vast region. For the first time people learned of such wonders as the Grand Canyon and the Continental Divide.

